

An abiding mystery: Who really did

By Will Englund
Special from The Baltimore Sun

The murder of John F. Kennedy — was it but a single landmark in an uncharitable world of intrigue and revenge, of mirrors upon mirrors? Or was it the straightforward event described 24 years ago by the Warren Commission?

From the beginning, critics have attacked the Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, shot Kennedy

and that Jack Ruby shot Oswald without premeditation. By one count, 150 books on the assassination have been published. An investigation by the House of Representatives in 1979 found that there was "probably" a conspiracy.

The critics ask questions and present evidence that seems awfully hard to square with the Warren Commission's finding. The case remains very much alive.

Television specials, magazine

articles, and three new books take up the question of who killed Kennedy. Two of the books, "Contract on America" by David Schein and "Mafia Kingfish" by John H. Davis, argue that the Mafia was behind the assassination. "Final Disclosure" by David W. Belin, counsel to the Warren Commission, argues, not surprisingly, that the commission got it right.

Interest has remained so strong, says Henry Hurt, a critic of the

commission report, because of "the frustration and the fascination that spin from any mystery."

Over the years, critics have amassed a wealth of information that suggests there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. Much of it is incredibly arcane. Much of it also is hard to credit, and a great deal falls into the "could well have" category — as in, Oswald could well have met so-and-so during the summer of 1963 in New Orleans.

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it, and why?

But three salient aspects of the case stand out.

- The rifle that Oswald supposedly used was made in Italy between 1891 and 1941. Although various government experts have tried, no one has been able to accurately fire off shots as quickly as they were fired Nov. 22, 1963.

- The Warren Commission concluded that one bullet pierced Kennedy's neck, smashed through

Texas Gov. John B. Connally's fifth rib and wrist, lodged in his thigh — and was later found on a stretcher at Parkland Hospital. Critics have argued that the bullet would have had to have changed course in midflight to have accomplished all that.

A report on the TV program "Nova" showed that one bullet could have done what the Warren Commission said. But no one has explained why the bullet found at the hospital showed virtually no distortion or mangling, despite crashing through two people and demolishing two bones en route.

- Ruby had a lifetime involvement with organized crime, first in Chicago and then in Dallas. To believe that Ruby was motivated solely by grief and sympathy for the Kennedy family, when by all accounts he was an unsentimental and hard-headed crook, would seem to go against common sense. If something else was going on, what was it?

The answer, according to the various conspiracy theorists, probably involves the CIA, the Mafia, Fidel Castro's agents, or some combination of the three.

In the early 1960s the CIA was actively trying to overthrow Castro. Elements in the agency reportedly were deeply bitter at what they perceived as Kennedy's stab in the back during the Bay of Pigs fiasco in early 1961. It is not hard to imagine that Oswald, though an avowed Marxist, was associated with the CIA, considering his ease in defecting to the Soviet Union and then back again.

But a line of thinking that has gained popularity among conspiracy theorists holds that the CIA was not involved in the assassination. Hurt, whose 1986 book "Reasonable Doubt" many consider the most painstaking examination of Kennedy's killing, said in a recent interview that he might accuse the

CIA of a cover-up to hide an embarrassing connection to Oswald, but that the connection "doesn't translate into assassinating Kennedy."

The CIA was interested in assassinating Castro, and the Cuban leader was well aware of its efforts. Hurt and others say he probably learned what was going on from the people hired to kill him — CIA-recruited members of the Mafia who presumably stood to regain their lucrative business in Cuba if Castro could be eliminated.

But, the thinking goes, Mafia chiefs may have reached an accommodation with Castro to use Cuba as a staging ground for bringing narcotics into the United States, and may have killed Kennedy to cut off administration heat on the Cuban Communists and the American mobsters.

"I admit it's speculation," says Hurt. "But the mob and Castro teamed up and drew on various sources of their own, and did it. Castro had the sophistication. The mob had the means."

Ruby had very clear connections to the New Orleans Mafia family headed by Carlos Marcello. Oswald had tangential connections. But Hurt and others have come to believe that Oswald, who was a miserable marksman when he was in the Marines, was probably telling the truth the night of Nov. 22 when he told reporters, "I'm just a patsy."